



HOME-COMING

LILA MAJUMDAR





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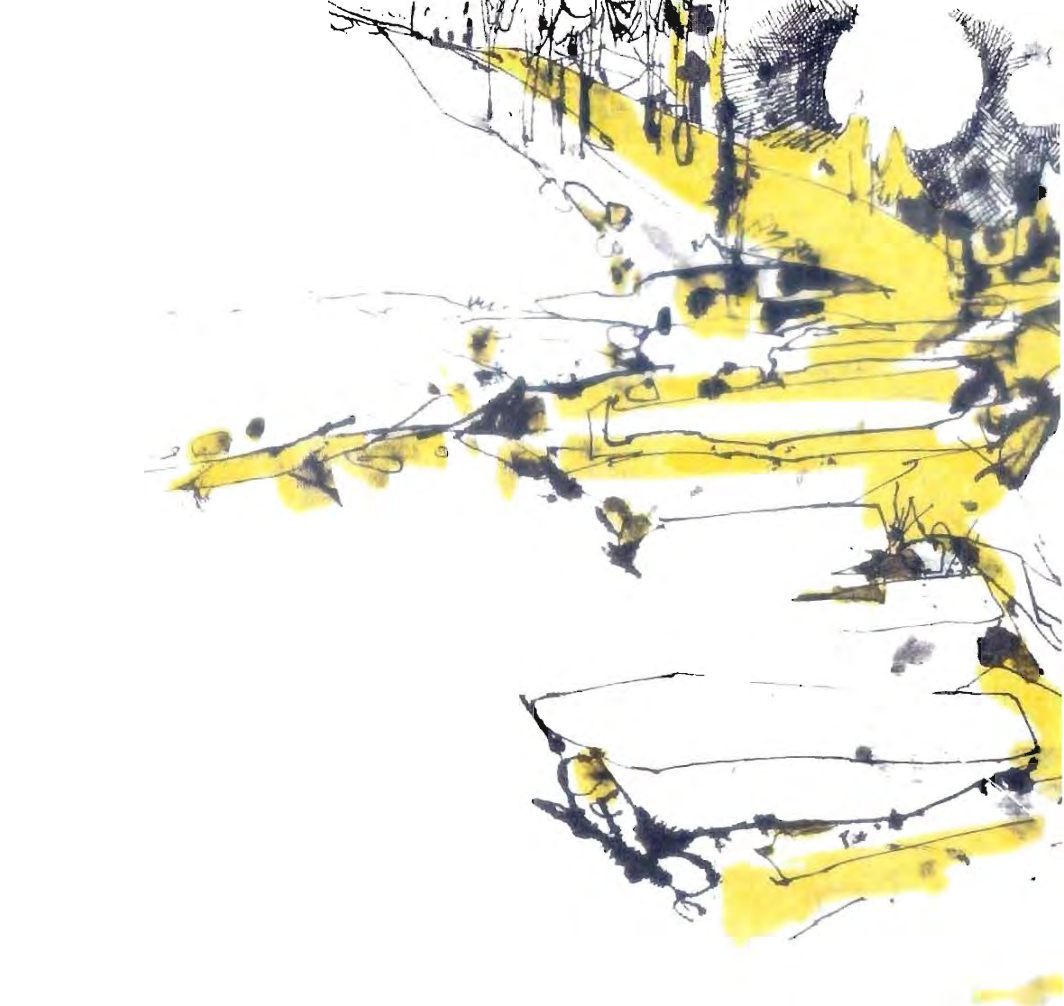
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Kanu ran all the way uphill, from the red-roofed school in the valley at the foot of the hill to the tiny wooden bridge across the gurgling stream. On Sundays and holidays he caught fish here with Nana. They would sit on the flat stone under the bridge, their heads in the shade, their feet in the sun. The warmth from the stone crept up his spine and made him feel comfortable, said Nana.

If he climbed the stone stairs which ran up the hillside, it took Kanu exactly ten minutes to reach home. Up ten steps, turn, walk five steps, turn, up ten steps again, right



up to Mulki, their own little hamlet, which clung to the edge of the hill. From his bedroom window Kanu could see across the Dhankheti valley, right into the windows of the old Survey Office, where Bapu used to work, before he was transferred to the big city office.

On his way up, Kanu passed the kitchens of all the houses on the hill and by the time he reached home through the creaking red back-gate, he knew what every family was having for dinner that evening.

Sometimes the people cooking dinner looked out of their windows and calling to him, asked after his mother and if his father's letter had arrived. They gave him tit-bits to eat, which he munched as he walked up: little fried things, or a sweetmeat, or a ripe apricot. But Ma did not like this. Her home was beside the river Ajoy, in the plains of Bengal, and there everything was different.

The land there was flat as a *chupati*. The earth was red and broken in places. The hot wind blew through the dark green *sal* forests, and in March you could see a single *palash* tree with its flaming red flowers from miles away. They called it the 'flame of the forest'. Kanu had never seen the plains.

"Ma! Nana! Where are you? I am hungry," called Kanu, as he crossed the courtyard and mounted the three stone steps to the back verandah. Out they came at once, Mother pushing open the swing-door to the dining-room, Nana shuffling out from his little room at the end of the verandah, Meow, the lazy cat and Bow-wow the woolly mountain-dog, who never sat still for a moment.

"How many eggs did the hens lay today?" asked Nana

eagerly.

Mother was annoyed. "There you go, Uncle, asking foolish questions, when the boy has not had a mouthful of food as yet! Eggs indeed, who cares about them!" The laughter vanished from Nana's twinkling eyes. Kanu threw down his school-bag and rushed at Nana, hanging round his skinny neck, and nearly toppling him.

"I care," he cried. "Fourteen eggs we collected, Nana, besides the one that broke."

Mother sniffed. "Fourteen eggs from twenty broody hens! Don't make me laugh! Take off your school shoes now, wash your hands and come to tea. We are



having *puris* and new potatoes and peas from our garden and Nana has picked a little basketful of raspberries from the hillside, which are warm from the sunshine!"

Kanu loved his home with its whitewashed walls, red corrugated iron roof and green doors and windows. In the afternoon he could see the sunlight shining on the window-panes from far below in the little school beside the brook down in the valley. "Come home, come home," the window-panes seemed to say, "here we all are, waiting for you!"

They had their own kitchen-garden, where U-bin the gardener grew sweet carrots, green cabbages and bright red radishes. There was a plum tree, a peach tree, a pear tree and a crab-apple tree, whose fruit was sour, but which tasted delicious when Nana roasted it over a wood fire. Kanu loved Nana. Nana was seventy-eight years old and looked a bit like a withered red apple himself.

Mother said he was not really a relation, but only a friend of Grandfather's. Long ago they had worked together in the Forest Department when Grandfather was alive. Now Grandfather was gone and Bapu worked in the great city in the plains. He too loved Nana. He said Nana had taught him all the best things he knew, though Nana had left school at the age of fourteen to join the Forest Department, first as messenger-boy, then as forest-guard, just as Grandfather himself had done.





“What shall we do today, Nana? Shall we take the new catapult you made and try to bring down the bad hawk which killed U-bin’s little pigeon?” asked Kanu.

Mother was alarmed. “No, no, don’t shoot at fierce birds such as hawks; they might pounce on you. Why don’t you kill some of those crows in the *neem* tree; horrid, thieving creatures!”

Nana was silent. Later, he said to Kanu, “Those are not ordinary crows, child; they are ravens. You can tame them and teach them to talk. They have funny hoarse voices and they chuckle like old men. I once had a raven.”

Kanu cried, “Why do you stop, Nana? What happened to your raven? Did Grandfather see it?”

“Indeed, he did. We were forest-guards then, posted in the reserve forest on the slope above Mulki. There was a terrible storm and the wind blew down a tiny raven from its nest, high up in a fir tree. The woodcutter’s boys

found it first. It did not have real feathers but only a damp black down on a pink goose-pimple skin. They carried it around in their pockets for a while. Then their mother must have scolded them, for they left it at the foot of the fir tree again. They thought its mother would pick it up and take it back into the nest. But the mother crows never take their babies back, if they smell human hands on them. They peck at them and throw the poor little things out of the nest."

Kanu felt so sad that he could hardly breathe. "What did you do, Nana?" he asked.

"Well, your grandfather put the baby bird in his pocket and climbed the fir tree. The big birds flapped their wings and flew at his face. He waved his scarf at them and placed the baby in the nest. Its mother immediately pushed it out. It would have fallen to the ground and been killed if I had not caught it. I felt its little heart thudding against my thumb and I decided I would never let it go again.

"I took it home and gave it to the wife, who had no children, and I said, 'There now, bring up this baby and you will never be lonely.' So she did. The raven grew big and fat and had a fine crop of jet black feathers and shiny reddish eyes and talked nineteen to the dozen!"

"Whose wife was that, Nana? Where is she now?"

"My wife, Kanu. She is now living in the house of Ublei, the King of Heaven. Everybody is happy there. I have been living in this house ever since she went away."

"Bad wife, leaving you alone!"

"No, no, she was very good. She told me to look after



Runar, the raven. So I did for twenty-two years and then one morning it flew away and never came back. I really don't know how I shall explain this to her, when I meet her again."

Kanu was astonished. "How can you meet her again, Nana? Do you know the way to heaven?"

Nana was annoyed. "I can easily find the way there, just as all the little streams and rivulets find their way to Barapani. Have you not seen the big waters of Barapani, running along the motor road from the plains? But enough of that for the present. Let us go and fish in our little stream. Tomorrow is a holiday, so you have no homework to do."

They went down to the little bridge, with their fishing rods and creel. They took the winding road, because Nana's knees were a little stiff and he could not manage the

stairs. But when Nana was young, he used to run up them two at a time, carrying a load on his back too.

They had a very special fishing place under the bridge. The willow trees cast a shade with their hanging leaves and there was a flat stone, warm from the sun. Nana would bring huge ants' eggs and how the fish jumped at them! Nana knew everything about fishing: He had fished with Grandfather from this same stone and with Bapu too years later. "Never catch very small fish," said Nana today, "they are fish-children. See how they flash about in the water. Catch only big fish, which you can cook and eat. Throw the others back, boy." Nana carefully removed the hook from the throat of a little fish and set it free.

Kanu asked, "Do you love all animals, Nana? Even fish and birds? Do you love worms and insects too? Do you love snakes, then?"

Nana laughed and said, "Well, it is safer to love insects and snakes from a distance. Have you noticed the red long-haired caterpillars that slide down the pine trees and run for their lives? Never touch them, or you will get their hair sticking to your fingers and hurting dreadfully. But the hair comes off if you put a little lime and let it dry."

"And what about snakes, Nana?"

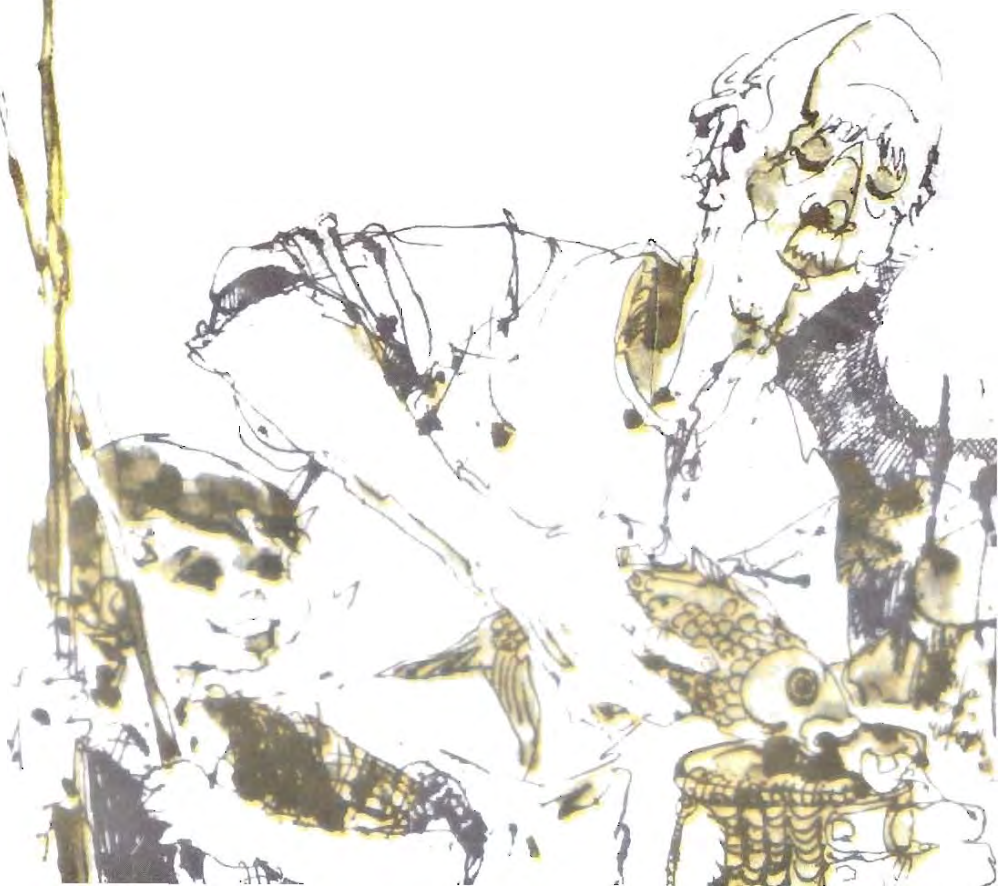
Nana laughed. "As for snakes, in winter they seek safe little holes and sleep right through the cold weather. They won't harm you, if you keep out of their way. Once my elder brother moved a large stone on the hillside and there inside a deep hole, he saw a long green snake, lying quite still. Its bright blue eyes were open and motionless. Elder Brother put back the stone and said, 'It will wake up wher



spring comes.' I asked, 'But why are its eyes open?' 'Didn't you know that snakes have no eyelids and cannot shut their eyes? When it wakes up, it will throw away its old skin and grow a lovely new one. At first the new skin is so soft that it cannot bear to move. It is very easy to kill it then.' I asked, 'Then why don't you kill the wicked snake, when its skin is soft?' Elder Brother said, 'What! Kill an enemy when he is weak! It is never done.' "

Nana talked all evening, always of things that had happened long ago. He could not remember recent events and would mix up names and places, but he never made a mistake about the past.

When the shadows lengthened, they gathered up their things and picked up the creel with Nana's five medium-sized fish and Kanu's one fish, larger than the others, which Nana had helped him land. There was a slight chill in the breeze, but the rocks were still warm. Nana



pointed to the northern horizon and there, like a delicate white pastel drawing in the sky, Kanu saw the snow-clad mountains. They were only visible on very clear days.

Kanu held his breath with excitement. "Can't we go there one day, Nana? Didn't Grandfather ever go there?" Nana shook his head. The snow-clad mountains were many hundreds of kilometres away. There were other mountain ranges in-between. The nearer ones looked green; the distant mountains were blue and hazy. Their Mulki was close at hand and the Mulki houses and gardens were pretty. Wild strawberries grew on the sunny slopes and little wild white violets in shady nooks among the rocks. They had a faint perfume and Mother loved them.

It took longer to reach home by the winding road. Nana got out of breath and had to stop twice to get his wind back. "Always walk uphill with your mouth shut tight, boy, and breathe through your nose, or you will soon be panting," said Nana.

"But you too are panting, Nana."

Nana laughed. "I am nearly eighty years old, boy, I am allowed to pant. I am only waiting for the boat to come for me."

Kanu was astonished. "How can a boat come up these mountain streams, Nana? Teacher said boats can only come up to where all the little streams descend the hillside and meet the big waters of Barapani."

Nana thought this over for a minute. "Is that so? Then I shall have to go to Barapani."

"May I come with you, Nana?"

Nana said, "You are only seven years old, boy, the boat

won't take you. I have lived nearly eighty years, seen much, learned much, worked hard, suffered, been happy. I have put out forest fires, cut down old trees, planted young ones. I hope you know that one must plant a young sapling in place of every tree one cuts down, or which dies of old age."

"Why, Nana?"

"Otherwise, the hills would soon grow bald. There would be no roots to bind the soil to the rocks and prevent land-slides. Soon, there would be less and less rainfall. The place would become bare and barren."

"What else have you done, Nana?"

"I have tamed animals and killed wild beasts."

"Oh! Oh! Then you have killed bears and tigers, Nana? Did you set traps for them?"

Nana got angry. "Does a real man lay traps for unsuspecting animals, boy? No, a wild animal must be free when the hunter fights it."

"Then why did the forest officers build the trap on the Laikor road?"

"Oh, that! That is only to catch the thieves who steal the Mulki lambs and chicken and little pigs. I hope you don't call that hunting?"

Kanu said, "They tie a little lamb inside the trap. The poor little thing is afraid of the dark and cries for its mother. I have heard it, Nana. Then the tiger comes and eats it up!" Tears filled Kanu's eyes.

Nana got angry. "Now don't be a fool, boy. Those are not striped tigers, but spotted leopards. Tigers rarely come up to these high hills. And they

never eat the lamb. They can't get at it. It is tied up in a separate cage. The leopard enters the trap and pulls the latch to reach the lamb. The trap-door falls at once and the leopard is caught. How it roars! The Mulki men come and capture it. The lamb is set free and runs helter-skelter looking for its mother. It gets a terrible fright but nothing actually happens to it. A man must know what it is to be afraid, boy, before he learns how to be brave."

So the days passed in the little hamlet of Mulki. It rained night and day in summer. Sometimes it rained cats and dogs and sometimes it went pitter-patter. The distant blue hills were covered with clouds. The nearer hills had a hundred new streams running down their slopes which met other little streams, and together they rushed rumbling and tumbling to join Barapani at the foothills.

Sometimes Kanu awoke at night and heard the rain-water leaking through the roof and falling drip-drip-drop on the wooden floor below. His mother would get up to place the big enamel bowl where the drops were falling. Half asleep,



Kanu would hear the rain drops making music in the bowl. The sound became dull as the water collected in the bowl and Kanu would fall asleep again.

It was still raining in the morning when Kanu awoke. Mother was feeling sad, thinking of her old mother in the little cottage in the plains near the river Ajoy. She packed Kanu's spare shoes with his books and made U-bin walk down with him to see that he did not slip and fall. The rain had made the roads slippery.

"The Ajoy floods its banks when it rains like this," said Mother.

"Will it wash away Grandmother's house, Ma?"

"No, Kanu, our house is built on high ground above flood-level."

Kanu said, "The Dhankheti stream floods its banks too. The stepping-stones are submerged. People can't cross over from Lumparing. But everything will be all right in an hour, Nana says. All the water will flow into Barapani, where Nana's boat will come."

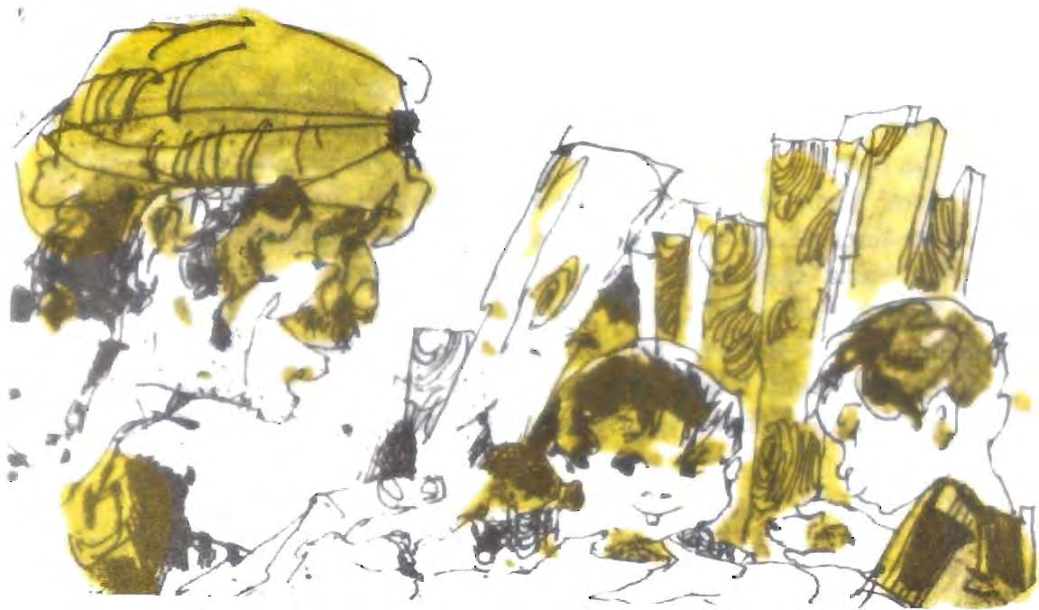
Mother sniffed. "The water stands for days around our village," she boasted. "People actually move about in boats. If the green rice plants are drowned for seven days, they can't breathe and they die. Your Dhankheti stream is like a little *nullah* beside our Ajoy."

Kanu was silent because he knew Mother felt sad about the Ajoy and her own little village Sonali. But the Dhankheti stream did not drown crops. Why, all the people who farmed on the terraces on Laikor hill cut little canals from the mountain stream to water their rice plants. The stream made the crops live.

School closed for a week in autumn and everyone went picnicking to the lovely waterfalls, or up among the pine trees. From Dhankheti, Kanu and Shyam went with Nana to see the timber-yard on Laikor Peak. How easily the huge circular saws cut through the white wood, making a swishing noise and scattering fine wood-dust! Kanu and Shyam gathered the dust in their hands. It smelt like incense.

"That is the oil in the wood," said the timberman, "that is real incense. It burns like a matchstick. All the big pine trees are dripping with oil. It sometimes oozes out of cracks in the branches and becomes hard. Haven't you seen little blobs of golden gum shining in the sunlight on the high branches of pine trees? It is the gum in the wood from which incense is made."

Nana looked amused. "It is also responsible for



forest fires, boy. The trees get drier and drier, all through winter. Then the March winds begin to blow and the dry branches rub against one another and catch fire. All the hill creatures fear forest fires. Oh! The things that I have seen!"

They crowded round him. "What things, Nana?"

"The wind whips up the fire and it races through the dry forests with the speed of a galloping pony. It burns up kilometre after kilometre. At night the sky turns red. All the people from the mountain villages help the forest-guards fight the fire."

Shyam was a newcomer to the hills. He had never seen a big forest fire. He was scared. He licked his dry lips and asked, "Are all the people in the villages burnt to death, Nana? Does not the fire brigade come to put out the fire?"

Kanu had never heard of the fire brigade. He now said, "The villagers and the forest-guards put out the fire, silly. They break off branches from the trees and beat out the fire."

"Yes," said the timberman, "that is how it is done here. Where are the roads for the fire engines? Where is the piped water for their pumps? No, we put out our own fires. Then, there are the fire-lines." Shyam had seen the fire-lines, of course, but he did not know what they were for.

Nana explained, "You can see the Lumparing fire-line from the bend here. It is a broad bare strip of land from the foot of the hill right up to the top and running down the other side. It is for stopping the fire from spreading to the Lumparing houses. It is so broad that the fire cannot jump

across it. Nothing is allowed to grow on it, so the fire cannot make its way across it. It has to stop at the edge of the fire-line and burn itself out, and all the houses are saved.”

Nana shook his head, remembering old fires. He said, “It is picnickers like us, who often start forest fires. They throw away burning cigarette ends on dry leaves and in a second they catch fire. Sometimes people make small fires to boil their tea and the dry branches nearby are set ablaze. They are doing it all the time, the thoughtless fellows.

“A forest fire is a terrible thing, boys. I have seen wild animals, crazy with fear, rushing out pell-mell, leopard and deer together, no one harming anyone else. Now let us talk of something else; forest fires make me sad.”

They went to look at the ropeway, which quickly brought down the cut timber from the mountain-top to the warehouses. How thick the steel cables were! The loaded trolleys ran along them. There was no electricity at this height. The trolleys rolled down the cables due to the pull of gravity alone. After they were unloaded at the warehouses, the empty trolleys were pulled up again with chains.

On their way back, they picked maidenhair fern from shady corners and the lovely silver fern, which leaves a white impression of itself, if you press it on the back of your hand. They gathered honeysuckle creepers. The flowers are pale cream and small, and their sweet scent takes you by surprise.

They came home with their arms full of wild flowers which Kanu put down on Mother’s lap. Shyam ran home with his flowers and ferns. Mother laughed, then cried and

held the honeysuckle to her nose.

"Why, Kanu," she said, "they are just like our *bhuin-champa*, the ground champak. My father once went to the dense *shegun* forests in Burma. A strong sweet smell came to his nose and he hunted around until he found some delicate white flowers with purple markings. They grew near the roots of a huge tree. There were no leaves, no green branches; only the beautiful flowers, growing straight from the soil. They looked as if they were made of wax."

"Didn't he bring them home, Ma?"

Mother laughed. "He did, child. He gathered the flowers for my mother and dug up the little fat bulbs and planted them under the mango tree in our garden. I remember seeing them when I was a child.

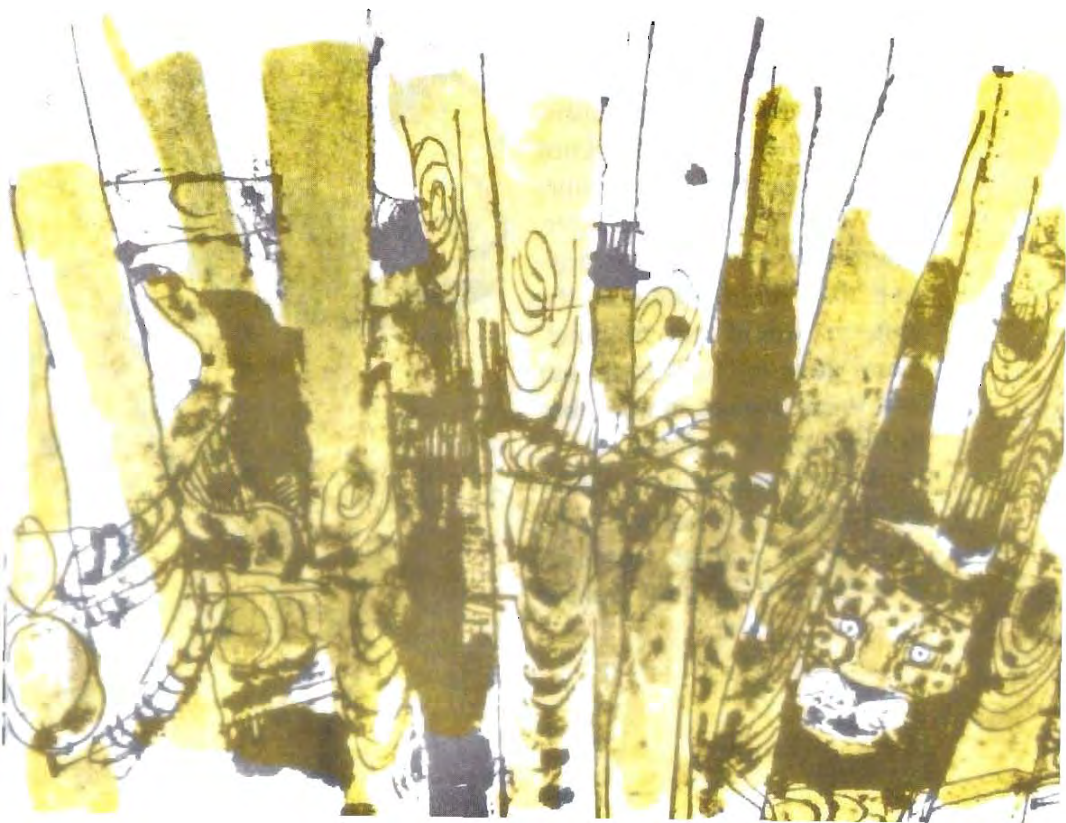
"They flowered in winter every year. After the flowers withered nothing was visible above ground, until long green leaf-buds came out of the soil in spring. Soon they opened out into broad leaves. The leaves withered in autumn, and the light green flower-buds appeared. I brought some bulbs for our garden here, but the cold winter killed them."

Kanu felt sad. "You should not have brought them here, Ma. Or you should have given them to old Mr. Holder to grow in the glass-houses in his garden. We can grow honeysuckle in our garden."

"I know," said Mother and went out to plant the honeysuckle outside her bedroom window, from where she would smell it all day.

Then followed a disturbed night. No one had a wink of sleep in Mulki. A leopard was caught in the trap. The howling and growling had to be heard to be believed ! Even the children left their warm beds to look at the leopard. Kanu went with Nana, though Mother was not very pleased.

There in the light of the bamboo torches, Kanu saw the spotted leopard clawing the strong wooden walls of the trap. Its eyes glinted oddly in the fire-light. The leopard was a female and quite big in size.



Kanu looked around for the lamb, but could see no sign of it. He asked Nana about it. Nana laughed and said, "Did you think the lamb would wait to see what happened to the leopard?"

"They are not going to kill it, are they?"

"No, no, it will be sent to the zoo; it is a fine creature," said one of the watchmen.

Nana looked grave. "You had better look out," he said, "it may have cubs in the neighbourhood."

Kanu was excited. "Cubs, Nana? Where?" Nana did not reply, but hurried Kanu home, now that the fun was over. There was no sleep for anyone that night, because the leopard would not be quiet. They gave it chicken to eat and bread soaked in milk, but nothing would calm it.

Kanu shivered in bed. How awful for a wild animal to be shut up in a cage, specially if it had left its cubs behind



in the forest! Who would look after them now?

Two days later, Nana found two queer kittens at the edge of the forest. They were round and furry, with golden eyes, and were cream in colour, with faint grey marks. They mewed and purred and rolled about in the pine-needles. Nana picked them up and brought them home. Mother took the dear little kittens on her lap and stroked their heads. She gave them a little bowl of milk, which they promptly overturned. She then took out Kanu's old feeding bottle and fed them by turns. How Kanu laughed to see them sucking away noisily!

The whole house was amused, but not Bow-wow and Meow. They had to be tied up in the kitchen, where they bristled with fury. Mother said, "All animals hate strangers, until they get used to them. These really are most unusual kittens."

"They are not kittens," said Nana from the doorway, "they are the leopard's cubs. Would you like to keep them?"

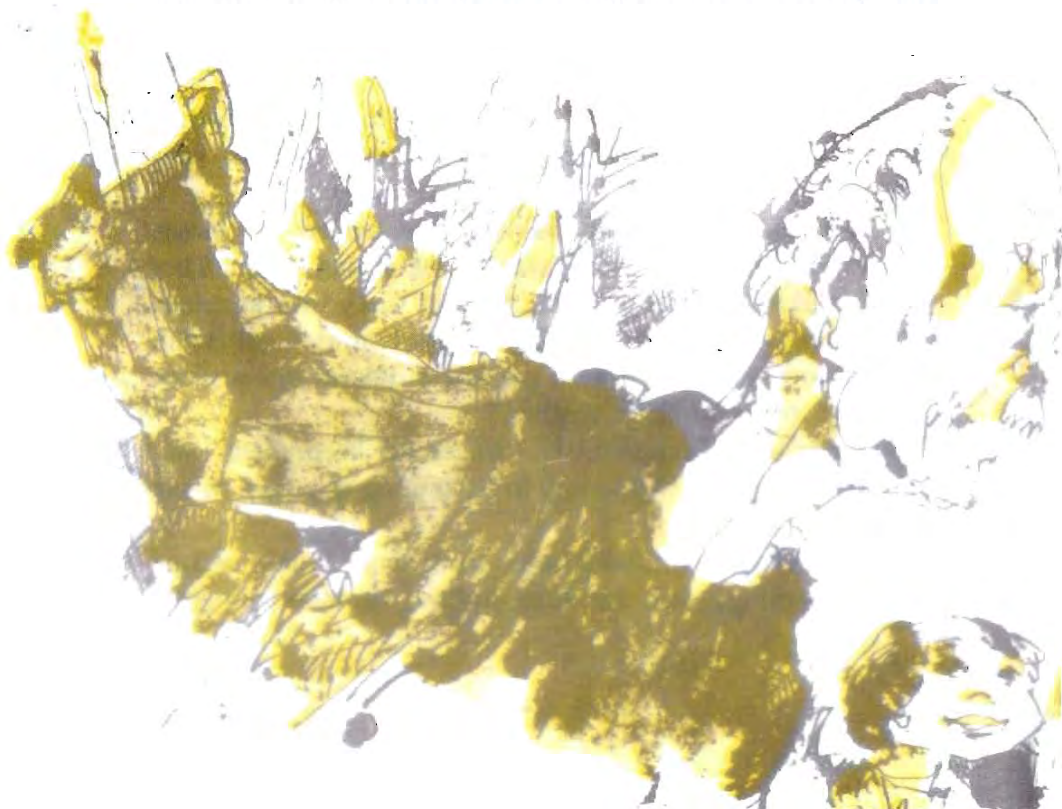
By this time, the two babies were curled up asleep on the rug before the fire-place in the sitting-room. They looked like two balls of wool. Mother was a little shocked. "So that was why the mother leopard howled all night. Let us look after them until the forest officers can arrange to send them to their mother."

Kanu was disappointed. "We could keep them, Ma, instead of sending them away to be shut up in a cage in the zoo, couldn't we?"

The old milkman, who came down from Laikor village every morning, with his long hollow bamboo container

filled with delicious cream-coloured milk, was shocked. "What do you mean! Keep leopard cubs in the house! Don't you know no one can tame the wild beasts of the forest? I found a little kitten in the middle of a forest fire long ago and took it home and brought it up. It got bigger and bigger and ate more and more, until my wife and my old mother did not know what to do! But it had such endearing ways that everyone loved it. It soon grew large grey spots on its yellow fur and everyone knew what it was.

"Then one fine morning it chewed and swallowed my wife's pet hen, bones, feathers and all! My wife was furious and tied it up in the yard all night. Next morning we



felt sorry for the poor thing and went out to set it free. But it had chewed up the string with which it was tied and was gone. The new lamb had also disappeared. We never saw hide or hair of either of them again! You can't really tame wild beasts."

Nana showed Kanu the huge bees' nest, high up in the fir tree, to make him forget the little leopard cubs, after the men from the forest office had taken them away to their mother. The nest looked like a huge ball, not quite round. It grew bigger every day and Kanu noticed that a few drops of thin honey had fallen on the ground under the tree and large black ants had collected there.

Later U-bin was stung by a bee and the milkman



warned Mother that soon no one would be able to live in the house. The nest should be burnt down. Nana was angry when he heard about it. Bees never harmed anyone unless they were disturbed. U-bin should not have tied the clothes-line to the branches of the fir tree.

Late at night, with Mother's permission, the milkman brought some of the men from his village. A bamboo torch was made and tied to the end of a long pole. The nest was then set alight. It burned brightly, being full of wax. The bees flew about blindly in the dark. Some had their wings singed and fell to the ground. The burning nest then fell to the ground. The villagers put out the fire and carried the nest away. Kanu cried and would not drink his milk.

Nana scolded him and reminded him of the ants he had drowned by pouring water into the ant-hole. Then Kanu cried for the poor ants as well. He knew Nana was feeling sad.

"Spiders are bad," said Kanu, "they eat dragon-flies! Birds are bad, they eat butterflies!"

"Little boys are just as bad," said Nana, "they eat the poor little fish and the chickens and the lambs! Somebody is always eating somebody else in the world. Now drink your milk and go to sleep."



For a long time, Kanu missed the cubs. Bow-wow and Meow, on the other hand, seemed highly pleased. They gambolled and frisked about the rooms, sniffing at all the corners where the cubs had been. Mother knew Kanu was missing the cubs.

"Did I ever tell you about the baby elephant that Survey Party number 12 caught near the Garo Hills?" she asked.

Kanu smelt a story and drew near her. "No, what happened? Where is the baby now?"

"Working hard, I should think, safe and sound somewhere. Elephants are so costly that people always take the greatest care of them, wherever they are."

Survey Party number 12 was Babu's own party. "Did Babu see the baby?" asked Kanu.

"Sure, he did. They had not really gone out to trap a baby elephant. They were taking measurements of the hills and streams in the dense forests. Some of the men returning to camp in the evening spoke of a dangerous elephant, which had chased them. 'Was there a herd, or only a single elephant?' asked Babu. 'A single one, we did not see any herd.' The surveyors knew that a single elephant was often mad and very dangerous. They began to move about very carefully, in twos and threes, armed with big guns.

"The next day, when the elephant again attacked a small party, they shot the poor beast. It fell down the bank from the road. The following morning people passing by were astonished again to hear elephant sounds. Babu went

down the bank with some men and there was a baby elephant, trying to push its mother up. The baby had hurt its foot and was a little lame.

“Bapu realised that the poor mother elephant must have thought the surveyors wanted to harm the baby. That was why it used to attack them. Everyone felt sad. They bandaged the baby’s foot and gave it sugarcane to chew. Later they brought it to the camp and trained it. At first it was so ticklish that it could not bear to be touched. They scrubbed it hard to cure it of being ticklish. Bapu said it used to wriggle and squirm and sounded as if it were laughing its head off. At last it was cured and could carry small loads on its back without feeling ticklish. It was so playful that everyone loved it. It used to creep up silently from behind a bush and suddenly push down whoever was standing there. You will be surprised how softly and silently the huge elephants move. They called the baby Raghubir. It is still with the survey people.”

Though the end of the story was happy, Kanu did not like to think of the poor mother elephant, who was only trying to save its baby. “And trying to kill poor survey men in doing so. Don’t forget that,” said Nana. “Come now, I shall tell you the happy story of a black-faced monkey’s baby.

“It happened in Banaras. My mother had gone there with a big party of pilgrims from the hills here. They were astonished at the crowds jostling in the streets, the stone steps going down to the river, the hundreds of boats, and the delicious milk sweets, which cost so little. They



went sight-seeing and loved everything except the herds of black-faced monkeys, which swarmed everywhere. Many houses had wire-netting over their courtyards to keep the monkeys out. 'Hanumans', they called them. No one killed them, they were thought to be sacred.

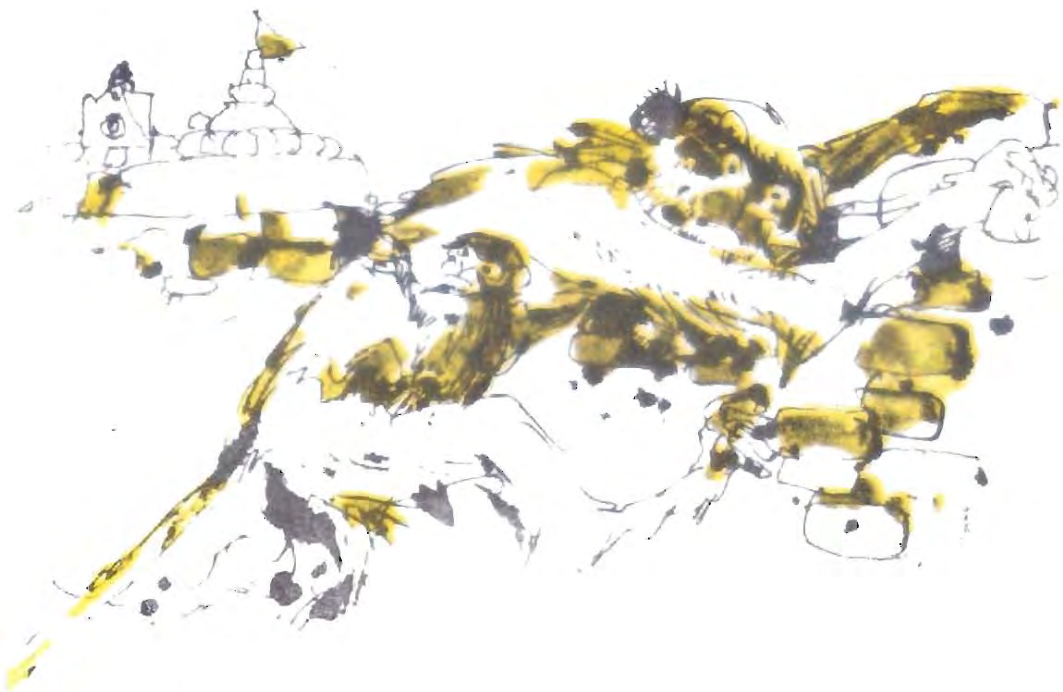
"They robbed fruit trees, stole clothes hung out to dry,



frightened small children and seemed to enjoy doing all this. My mother and the other pilgrims were scared of them. One morning, they heard a frightful screaming and screeching. The 'Hanumans' were fighting among themselves. My mother and the other women went indoors and were about to close the door, when suddenly a large mother monkey rushed up and thrusting its baby into my mother's arms, clambered up the compound wall and disappeared.

"It was a dear little baby, perhaps a month old. It could not eat anything, but sucked milk from rags dipped in milk. Everyone cuddled the baby and it soon fell asleep.

"Later in the evening, my mother was astonished to see the mother 'Hanuman' standing upright near the doorway. It was standing with its hands folded, looking almost like a human being.



Mother put the baby into its arms and it clambered up the wall and went away with the baby clinging to its body."

"But why, Nana?"

"Didn't you know that sometimes fierce male animals attack little babies? Or maybe an enemy herd had attacked them. Anyway, the mother monkey knew its baby would be safe with these women. Don't you like this story?"

"Yes," said Kanu and snuggled up to his own mother. Mothers are nice, he thought.

The days grew cooler as the year neared its end. The air was clear as crystal. At night the sky overhead looked like a great overturned bowl. It was deep purple in colour and studded with stars. Mother pointed out the planets, which had no light of their own and burned steadily in reflected sunlight. The stars had their own light and winked and blinked merrily. "They are actually other suns," said Mother, "they have planets of their own."

"Could you see them from your village Sonali, when you were a child?" asked Kanu.

Mother replied in an awed voice, "Yes, Kanu, from there too we saw the same stars and planets. Isn't that strange and wonderful? Perhaps, even now, my old mother is looking at these very same stars and thinking of us."

"Everyone in the whole world sees these same stars, Ma?"

"No, Kanu. Only the people in the northern half of the world see them. Those in the southern half see other stars. The sky looks dark blue over our village, not deep purple as it does here. Look, that is the Milky Way, that white belt across the sky. It is made up of millions of stars. We used to call it Akash Ganga, the Ganga of the skies."

Kanu said with wonder, "Everything is really the same everywhere, isn't it, Ma?"

"Yes," said Mother.

"Then why do you like Sonali better than Mulki?"

"I was born there, child. My mother lives there."

"Is it Sonali you miss, Ma, or your mother?"

"You talk too much, child," scolded Mother, but there was a smile on her lips.

As the days grew colder, the leaves began to fall from the trees. First they turned from green to yellow, then a brownish tinge appeared; the slightest wind from the north dislodged them. They drifted down and lay in heaps under the trees: yellow, brown, golden, bright red and even black.

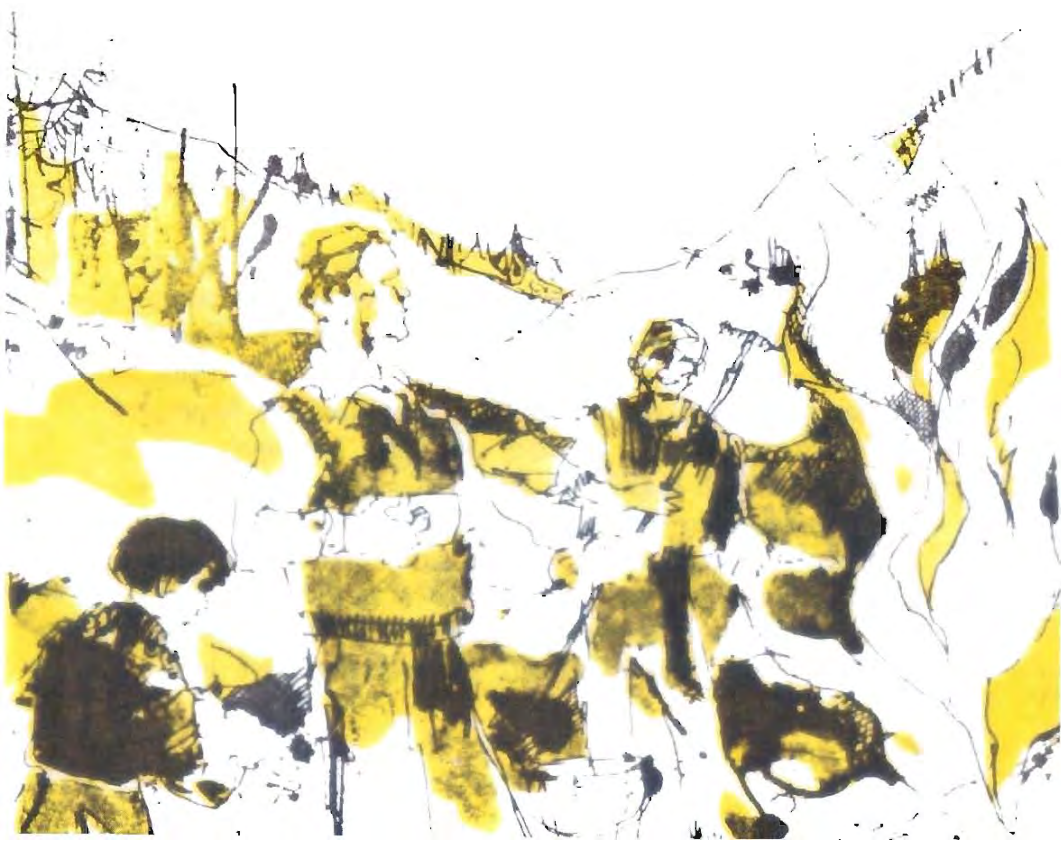
U-bin, the gardener, brought out his big rake and gathered the leaves together, so that the garden would look tidy. Then he collected the little heaps into one big heap,





away from the house. Nana called Kanu, "Come, boy, we are going to have a bonfire." At sunset U-bin set fire to the dry leaves and soon there was a merry blaze. The flames rose as high as the red roofs of the houses. The rooks in the trees were disturbed and flew away into the dark sky, cawing hoarsely.

Nana laughed. Kanu said, "They think it is tomorrow already, Nana."



Nana said, "No, they think there is a forest fire."

Mother became nervous. "I hope the hedge will not catch fire, Uncle?"

"No, no," said Nana, "U-bin is standing ready with his rake and a large bucket of water to put out any stray tongues of fire. It is quite safe."

They stood in a ring round the fire, with their faces to the blaze. Soon their cheeks were hot and red, but their backs were cold. All the children from the hillside had seen the glow of the fire and had gathered round. Some grown-ups had come too, even Shyam's father and Shyam from Dhankheti at the foot of the hill.

Mother brought out home-made biscuits for the children and little mugs of hot tea for the older people. Kanu took large sips from Nana's mug, when he saw Shyam drinking from his father's mug. Mother said children should not drink from the grown-ups' cups and brought out tiny cups of tea for the children as well.

How happy everyone was! Then the flames grew low, the fire died down. Suddenly it was bitterly cold, and the people said *namaskar* and went home. Kanu went inside the house, with Mother and Nana. Their clothes smelt of burnt leaves. They were tired but happy, and chattered merrily, as they ate their hot *puris* and onions fried with cauliflower from the garden.

"It is never so bitterly cold, down in the plains," said Mother, "everybody looks forward to the dry cool winters there. Here all the flowers wither away in the cold wind. There the seasonal flowers burst into bloom. But there the *sal* forests shed their leaves too, like our pear trees here.

At the end of winter, they burst into flower. The pollen from the flowers forms little heaps at the foot of the trees. The South wind blows the pollen about and makes people sneeze. The flowers have a faint sweet smell. How I miss that scent!"

Kanu got a little angry. "So do our pear trees, Ma," he said, "they are covered with lovely white flowers too, when winter is over. You can't see a single leaf, only flowers. Isn't that so, Nana?"

Nana nodded his head and said, "Then the petals fall down and tiny little pears appear, hard as stone and terribly bitter. The leaf-buds open and seem to hold their umbrellas over the little fruit, to protect them from the cold. The fruit grows bigger and bigger and the branches hang lower and lower with the weight. Have you noticed that, boy? It takes months for the fruit to become ripe enough to be eaten, because the weather is so cold."

"Yes," said Mother, "it is the same with our mangoes in Sonali. After the flowers come out, the leaf-buds open and protect the tiny mangoes from the sun and thieving animals. But the climate is warm and the fruit is ripe in three or four months. It is the same everywhere. Nature looks after her children. Where it is so cold that everything is frozen and not a leaf can be seen, animals find hidey-holes and go to sleep; roots rest under the ground and birds fly to warm countries. They come in thousands to Sonali: snipes and wild ducks. They spend the winter near the pools and ponds around our village and fly back again when winter is over.

"Come, Kanu, it is time to sleep."

The days grew shorter and shorter. Soon it began to grow dark at half-past four in the afternoon, though one could see the sun-rays shining on the rocks at the top of Laikor Peak. "The sun has not really set as yet," said Nana, "it has only dropped behind the hills."

The evenings seemed very long. It was too cold for fishing or flying kites. Nana brought out his carving tools and began to teach Kanu how to carve dogs' heads and dragons' heads in soft wood to make handles for walking-sticks.

Examinations were over; school closed for the long winter. Some people went away to the plains to avoid the cold. Nana and Kanu both loved the dry cold winters, specially the mornings when the frost lay white and shiny over the hillside.

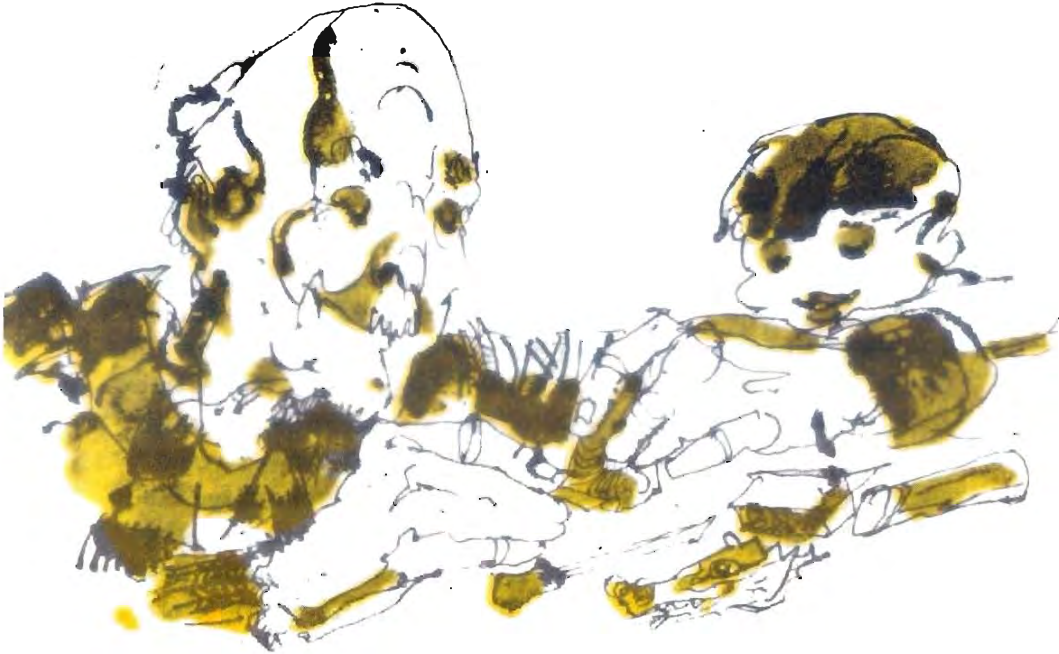
"I have never seen frost fall from the sky, Nana. Does it fall at night, when I am asleep?"

"No, boy," said Nana, "it does not fall from the sky. Frost is only dew which has frozen on the cold ground. Our hills are not high enough for snowfall."

The frost melted as soon as the sun's rays touched it.

A log fire was lit in the little fire-place in the sitting-room. They sat round it and had their meals. It was warm and cosy. Kanu looked at the logs burning fiercely. In his imagination he saw towns and cities burning, battles raging and fire-mountains belching forth flames. These are called 'volcanoes'. Nana had seen one.

A letter arrived from Bapu. He hoped to spend the



winter with them. He had two months' leave. Everyone was excited by the news. Mother gave the postman sweets and tea. He was U-bin's nephew and had friends in every house in Mulki. It made him late in finishing his rounds. Nana joked about it. "If his inside is full and warm, he does not mind walking uphill in the cold." His name was Doren.

It was Doren who had told Kanu about the bee-tree in the reserved forest. He had seen a swarm of bees flying away from it, one spring morning. He told Kanu about this. Two queen-bees cannot live in the same bee-hive. There is always one queen-bee, a few drones who do no work and thousands of busy worker bees, who gather pollen from the flowers, bring it to the hive, prepare wax for the walls of the hive, make honey for the babies, and keep the hive neat, clean and safe. The queen-

bee does nothing but lay eggs. It does not even look after its eggs or the little babies when they are born. The workers do everything.

If by chance the hive gets overcrowded, the queen-bee flies away with a large party of workers and drones to build another hive in some other place.

Mother knew all this. She had seen a bee-tree in the *sal* forest near Sonali. It was a dead rain tree, with a hollow trunk, whose leaves had all withered; the bark had peeled off; the trunk was cracked in places and one could see the honey-comb inside. Sometimes a little honey would ooze out and run down the trunk. Ants gathered round the little stream of honey. They did not dare to go too close to the honey-comb, for they knew that the watchful bees would immediately kill them.

Kanu was thrilled when he heard this. He wanted to see the bee-tree too. "Let us go to Sonali, Ma," he cried.

Nana was sitting near them, by the fire. "Why go all that way, boy? One day I can take you to the bee-tree in the forest here. But bees don't come out in winter. We had better wait till spring comes round again."

Kanu did not want to wait. He cried, "No, let us go now and see the bee-tree. We can go again in spring to look at the bees."

Mother did not agree. "What use is a bee-tree, if you can't see the bees?"

So the days passed, one by one. One sun-shiny day when Mother and the others were resting after lunch and Kanu was looking at the pictures in the new tiger-book



that had come in a parcel from Bapu, Nana put on his knitted woollen cap, that covered his ears and throat; Mother called it Nana's monkey-cap. Then he put on his heavy patched black forester's overcoat and picked up his thick knotty stick from its corner beside the door. Kanu sat up at once. "Where are you going, Nana? I want to go with you."

Nana replied, "No, no, I am only going to look at the springs in the reserved forest. You have already seen them."

"Haven't you seen them already too?" asked Kanu.



“Of course. Why, boy, you know I lived there in my hut near the springs for many years. I had to see that no one dirtied the water. Now they have built walls round the springs, so no one lives there. I have not seen those quarters for ten years. They must be in ruins. Lie down, boy, or your mother will get annoyed.” Saying this, Nana hurried away, without once looking back.

Kanu caught up with him at the edge of the forest. Nana was so angry when he saw Kanu that he turned homewards. Kanu pretended not to see him and took the path into the dense forest. If Nana wanted to go home, let him; Kanu was going to look for the bee-tree near the springs. In the end, Nana had to go with him. “I don’t know what your mother will say,” he grumbled.

Kanu said, “Why should



she be annoyed? I have put on my heavy coat and thick socks, Nana." Kanu had been here before, with a big picnic party. The whole of Mulki had come and there was singing and jokes and games. Everything looked different this time. The forest seemed denser; the trees crowded together. The afternoon sun was shining brightly outside, but here the light struggled through in tiny patches through the thick leaves. Everything looked strange and it was bitterly cold.

Kanu shivered inside his coat. The ground was damp under his feet. Grey and light green things looking like the hair and beards of old men hung from the branches of the trees.



“Those are plants too,” said Nana. “They suck the juice from the veins of trees, instead of taking it from the good earth. Mind you don’t go too close to the bushes. Supposing one of ‘them’ rears its hood !” Nana never mentioned the word ‘snake’ when he was in the forest.

Kanu replied, “But I thought they slept all through the winter ?”

“Not if someone treads on them. Come away now,” Kanu moved away from the bushes.

Suddenly he pricked up his ears. He could hear the sound of falling water. The forest has its own noises: birds rustling in the high branches, the breeze sighing among the pine-needles, the scampering of tiny feet, the chirping and droning of crickets. But of all these, Kanu liked the sound of falling water best. One could hear it, long before one saw the water. “Oh Nana, that must be the spring !”

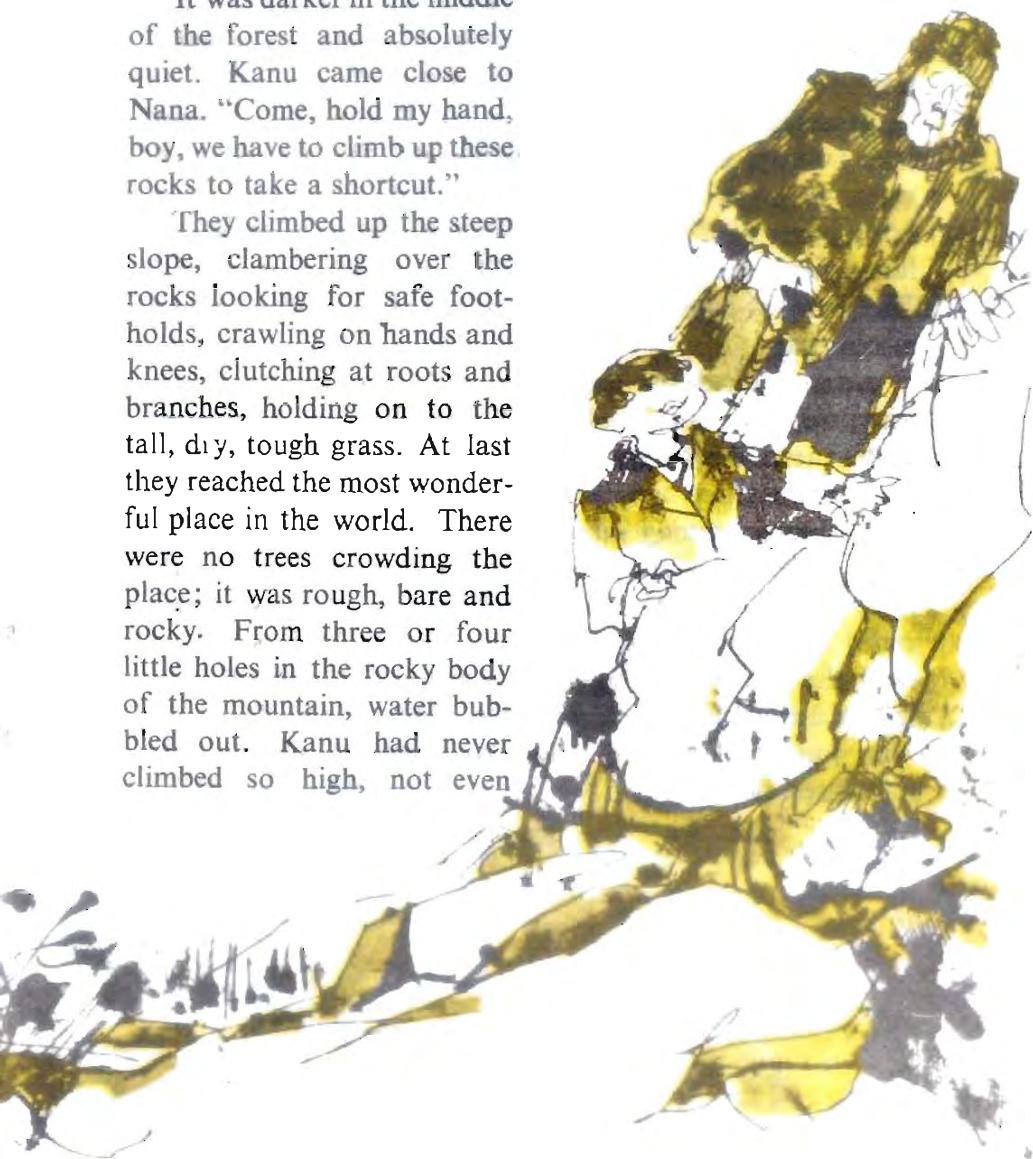
Nana replied, “The springs are higher up, boy. That is the stream which carries away the extra water that the pipes cannot catch. It too is spring water flowing down the mountainside, on its way to Barapani. Listen how it gurgles and laughs and sings, as it rushes down ! The little stones in the stream are rubbed smooth and round by the water passing over them. They are called



pebbles.”

It was darker in the middle of the forest and absolutely quiet. Kanu came close to Nana. “Come, hold my hand, boy, we have to climb up these rocks to take a shortcut.”

They climbed up the steep slope, clambering over the rocks looking for safe footholds, crawling on hands and knees, clutching at roots and branches, holding on to the tall, dry, tough grass. At last they reached the most wonderful place in the world. There were no trees crowding the place; it was rough, bare and rocky. From three or four little holes in the rocky body of the mountain, water bubbled out. Kanu had never climbed so high, not even



when they had the picnic. He was astonished. Was this the water-spring, which supplied water to the whole town? "Oh, Nana, look at the water flowing away and being wasted. What will the people drink?"

Nana said, "Talk sense, boy. It is not being wasted, it is rushing along to meet Barapani. The thirsty earth sucks up some of the water, and cows, goats and sheep drink some of it when they cross the stream on their way home from the high pastures. Do you call that waste? The town's drinking water comes from the springs higher up."

Kanu looked up the slope and saw more springs with low roofs and walls built around them. They went up to these springs and saw that the walls did not reach the roofs. There was a space about half a metre wide covered with a strong wire-mesh to let the air into the huts. Kanu looked through the wire-mesh and saw the water bubbling out of several holes, making tiny streams, which joined up to make bigger streams. Big black pipes carried away the water from here. The water that was left over flowed down the hillside to meet other streams from the other huts and hurried down to Barapani, nearly sixty kilometres away.

Kanu asked Nana, "Where do the pipes go?"

"To the huge overhead tank near Mulki. Then other pipes carry the water to every part of the town. The piped water is imprisoned water, it never reaches Barapani. Let us go now, this place makes me sad."

"Why sad, Nana?"

"Because I lived here for many years, long ago, boy. Do you want to see where my house stood? Come then."

Standing in the middle of a small smooth plot of land was a little heap of flat stones. "Look, these stones made the foundations of my house."

Nana pushed aside some of the stones and a little wooden ball rolled out. It had once been painted red; now the colour had faded. Nana picked it up and gave it to Kanu. "Here, take this. My wife had a little boy. I



made it for him. But he did not live. Come, let us go home. It is getting late."

By the time they reached home, the sun was setting. Mother, her face pale, was running up and down the road to Laikor, looking out for them.

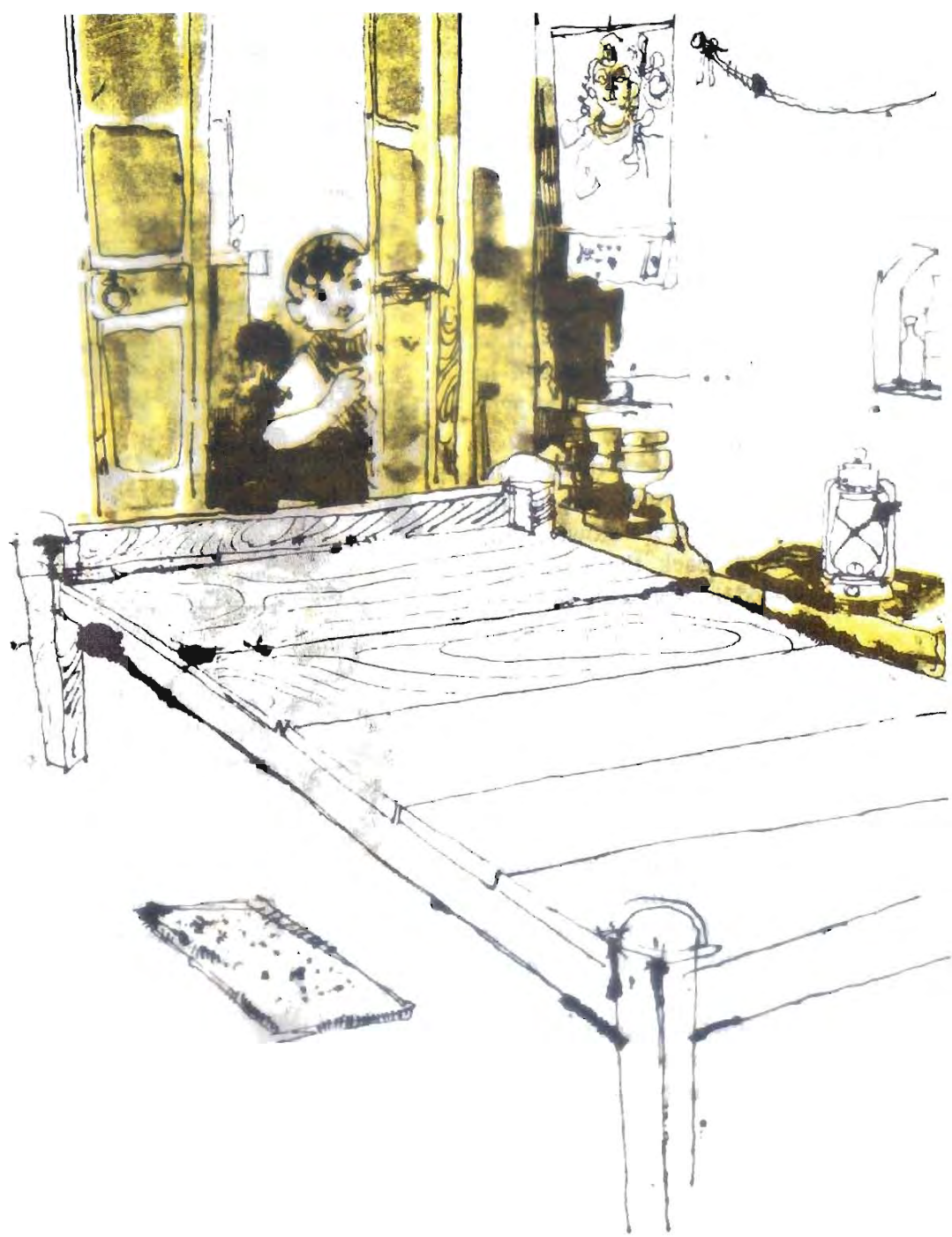
She had thought that they had come to grief and she lost her temper when she saw them. She scolded Nana harshly and slapped Kanu's cheek hard. Then she burst into tears and rushed into the house, dragging Kanu with her.

When the evening meal was ready, Mother said to Nana, "Uncle, you had better have your meals in your own room. Kanu behaves badly when he is with you." Then she turned to Kanu and cried, "I shall give you a spanking, if you go out with Nana again. And don't touch that dirty old ball." Mother snatched the ball from Kanu's hands and, opening the window, threw it out. Nana did not say anything. He went away to his room, dragging his feet. He sent back his food untouched.

When Kanu woke up the next morning, the first thing he did was to run to Nana's room. Nana was not there. His heavy stick, his rug and his old leather forester's bag were gone too. Kanu came back slowly, took out his tiger-book and looked at the same page for a long time.

A little later, Kanthai, who worked in the kitchen, brought Nana's bread and milk and went towards Nana's door. Kanu raised his head and said, "Nana will not be eating his bread and milk. He has gone away."

Hearing this, Mother ran out of the dining-room. "What do you mean, gone away! Where can an old man



of nearly eighty go in this weather ?”


Kanu's heart was heavy. “Maybe he has gone to Barapani. His boat will come for him there. He is going to look for his wife. You threw away the ball he had made for her son who died.”

Mother's face turned ash-grey. She went out to the kitchen-garden slowly and brought back the ball. She rubbed it dry with the edge of her sari and asked, “What shall I say to your father, when he comes from Calcutta tomorrow and asks for Nana ?”

Kanu said, “Bapu is bringing a warm vest for Nana and canvas shoes with rubber sides, so that his feet are comfortable. Leather shoes hurt his corns.” Kanu began to cry.

Mother got up and walked about the room, drawing the curtains and tidying the





books. Then she sat down. "Are you sure he went to Barapani ? Did he take the bus?"

Kanu smiled. "How can he take the bus ? He will have to follow the Dhankheti stream, all the way to where it meets Barapani. Who knows where the boat will be waiting for him ?"

Mother did not understand all this, but she said, "Let us go that way too. We must bring him back. It is all my fault. There is no one quite like him."

It did not take them long to get ready. Mother took some food in a little bag. She took a stick for herself and another for Kanu. Both of them put on warm clothes and thick walking-shoes. Kanu put the little wooden ball into his pocket. Nana had given it to him. It could not be left behind.

The little stream which carried the extra water away from the spring had been joined by other small streams and had become a big stream, long before it flowed by Mulki. The Mulki stream twinkled and danced down the hillside. At the foot of the hill it seemed to spread out its skirt in a beautiful waterfall and plunged into the Dhankheti stream. Together they gurgled and splashed downwards.

It was a lovely place. Huge tree-ferns grew beside the river. A path ran beside the stream. That was the route they had to take.

Kanu pointed to a shady place and said, "Some people fish here. Sometimes when the water rises in summer, trout escape from Mr. Holder's ponds and swim down the Dhankheti river. People catch them here."

Mother was surprised. "How do you know all this, Kanu?"

"Nana brings me here sometimes."

The wind sighed in the pine-needles. Mother was out of breath. "Let us rest a while here, Kanu, I can't walk any more without a break."

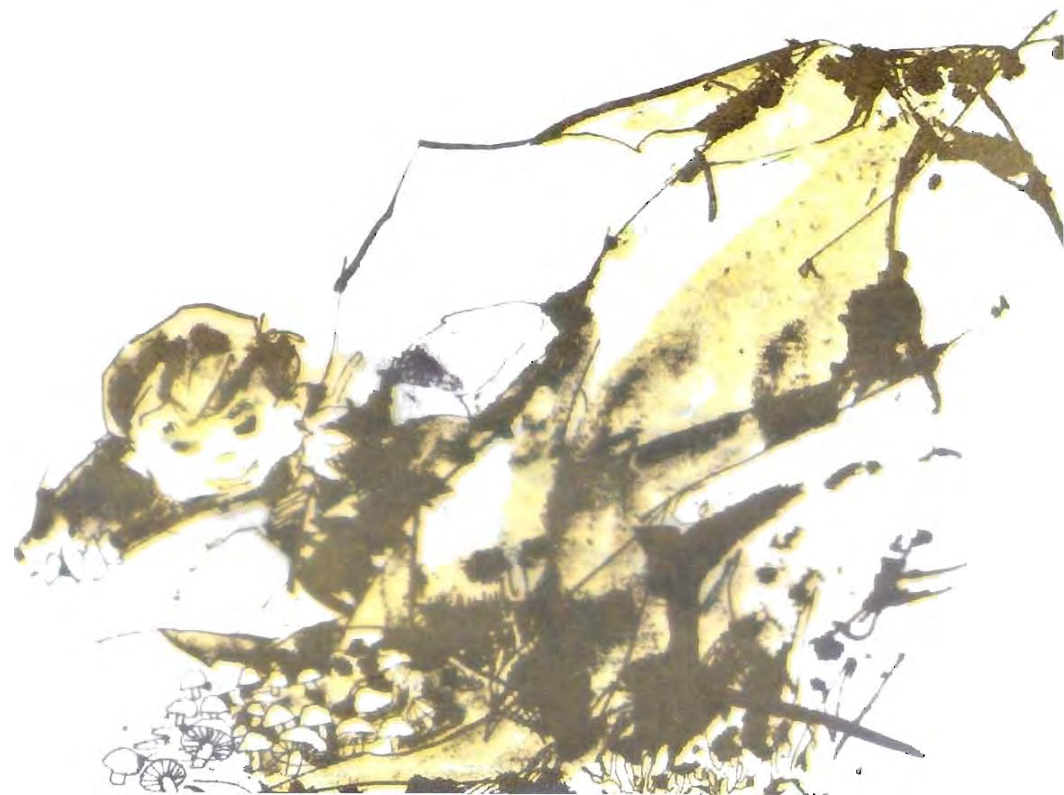
She sat down on a flat stone, which the morning sun had warmed, and began to rub her knees. When one walks downhill, the weight of the body falls on the knees and they ache. At least, old people's knees ache: Mother's knees, Nana's knees, but not Kanu's.

While Mother rested, Kanu looked around. There was a hole under the rocks. A little water had collected beside it. Cream-coloured mushrooms grew there. They had a feather-like texture. Nana had told him that they tasted delicious when fried with onions. Mother would not let him touch mushrooms. She said they would make his fingers sore. People died from eating mushrooms. But only from poisonous mushrooms, Nana had told him. One had to learn to know the difference. These feathery mushrooms were sweet and safe.

Kanu looked into the hole. Two little specks of light shone inside. They were the eyes of the water-rat which

lived there. It had four babies when Kanu had last seen it. It had bared its teeth when Kanu and Nana had peeped in. The babies must have grown up and gone away. It was alone now and crouched in a corner, blinking its eyes. Kanu found some nuts in his pocket and left them near the mouth of the hole. Nana had told him never to throw food at little animals. It scared them away.

A peculiar kind of grass grew here, with long blades, striped in pale mauve and smelling sweet, when rubbed.



Mother loved the smell. She had never noticed this grass before.

There were wild lilies with broad leaves. Under the leaves clung a blob of froth. "Ugh!" said Mother, "that is somebody's spittle. Throw it away."

Kanu laughed. "Ma, don't you know anything? That isn't spittle. There is a tiny insect inside the froth. It has blown the froth out of its own body and is hiding inside, so that lizards and sparrows may not find it."

Mother sighed and said, "Nana must have taught you all this, just as he taught your father. Your father knows all these places. Come, let us go on our way, or we





shall never catch up with Nana. Your father will be here tomorrow."

Kanu was beside himself with joy, when he heard this. He quickened his steps. "Hurry, Ma, hurry. Nana is a clever man and must be way ahead by this time!"

Both of them were thirsty. They knelt on the grassy bank, and drank the sweet cool mountain water, with their cupped palms. Then they went on their way again, always walking downhill. Sometimes the path was smooth, but at other times the going was rough. Kanu skipped on ahead and then waited for his mother. He helped her across heavy boulders.

The sun was overhead, and walking since the morning had made them hot and tired, but they were unwilling to turn back without Nana. Besides, the return journey would be uphill all the way. They did not have the strength to make it.

Poor Mother was panting. "Who knows which route he has taken. He may not have come this way at all."

"No, Ma, no. He must have followed the stream. Our Dhankheti stream joined Lumparing way back. There are other streams too. They all meet Barapani. If you follow any one of them, you will reach Barapani. That is where Nana's boat is waiting."

Mother quickened her steps when she heard this and almost ran along beside Kanu. Her face was red and her hair was untidy. They walked all afternoon and well into evening. Soon they reached Mugumi, where the stream plunged down a hundred metres in a grand cascade. Mother stopped short. "What now, Kanu?"

Kanu laughed and pointed to the narrow winding path, which zigzagged its way down beside the thundering waterfall. "Look," he said, "That's our route, it goes all the way down. But your knees are aching. Can you make it, Ma?"

Mother said, "Oh, yes, my knees are well again." She ran along ahead of him. The thunder of the cascade deafened their ears, and they could not hear each other speak. Little drops of water from the flying spray clung to their hair and eyebrows. The earth trembled

beneath them.

They hurried down silently. A single false step meant danger. At times, Mother stopped and gazed round in wonder. The cliffs, rocks and tall trees and the dark blue cloudless sky above looked unreal. Then they reached the foot of the waterfall.

The thundering water had scooped out a deep pool down below. Here the water swirled round. The flying particles of water formed a cloud. A ray of sunlight made a rainbow. Mother stared speechless. Kanu stood beside her, silent.

Suddenly, from the dense fir forest beside the pool holding something carefully and tenderly in his arms, came Nana.

"Nana, Nana, Nana!" cried Kanu and ran to meet him.

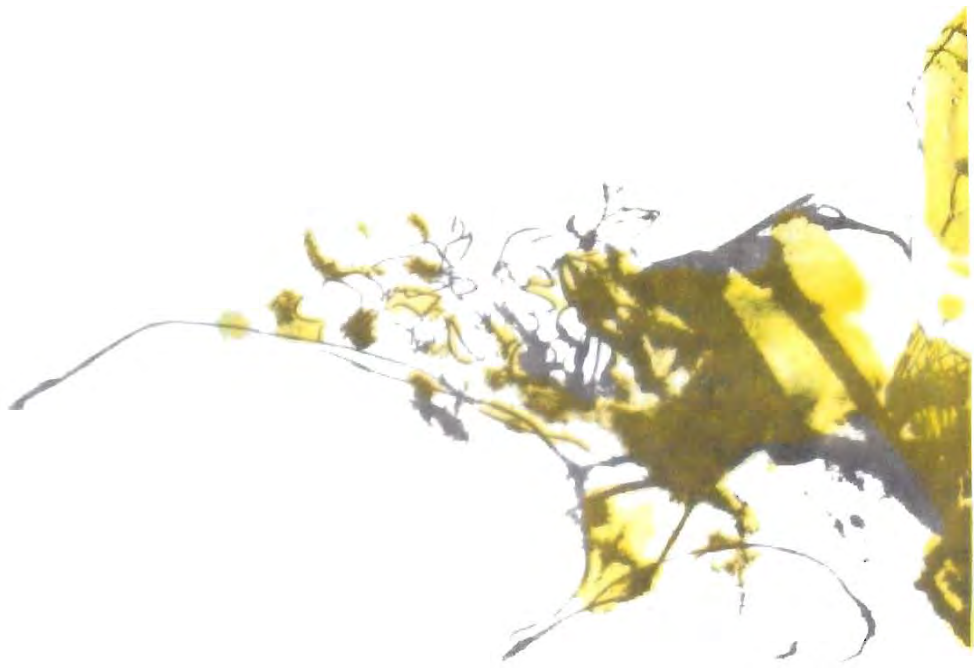
Mother ran too and fell at Nana's feet. "Oh, Uncle,



forgive me!" she wept.

Nana was very angry. "Get up, girl," he cried, "this is no time for tears. Can't you see that the wild fowl's wing is injured? The hunters have been out again, the wretches! Get sticks, make a splint. Quick now, hurry!"

Nana sat down on a rock, with the beautiful bird on his knees and mopped his brow with a soiled handkerchief. There was thread, a penknife and some rags in Mother's bag. Kanu gathered sticks to make the splint. The lovely bird lay limply on Nana's lap, with its eyes closed.





Kanu howled, "Is it dead, Nana ?"

Nana scolded him. "Quiet, boy, men don't cry. Now, hold it tightly, while I tie the splint."

The wild fowl was beautiful: gold, orange and reddish with blue and green shadows around the throat. Its feet were bright yellow. Slowly the dark eyes opened. Kanu danced with joy. Nana wrapped the bird in his rug and put it into Mother's arms. "Hold this, girl, while I get my things."

Kanu went with him to the edge of the forest where his overcoat, cap and bag were hanging from the branch of a tree. They came back to where Mother was waiting.

"Home, now," said Nana.

Mother looked distressed. "Home, Uncle ? How can we go home ? Home is so far away. I can't walk a step farther."

"What nonsense !" said Nana, "Home is never far away. Round that bend in front of us is the bus road. The bus will take us right to the foot of Mulki hill. It goes all the way from Mulki to Barapani. That was how I came."

Then he looked at them severely. "I hope you did not walk all this way, girl?" Seeing her silent, Nana said to Kanu, "Well, boy, is this how you look after my poor girl?" Kanu hung his head.

Later snuggling near Nana in the bus, Kanu whispered to him, "We had to walk beside the stream, Nana. We did not know where your boat would be waiting."

Nana was astonished. "Boat ? What boat ? This is no time to be talking about boats, boy. Boats indeed !



Who will look after the bird ?
He will peck at everybody,
the moment he is properly
awake. And isn't Bapu coming
tomorrow ? Who will go
fishing with him ? Don't talk
of boats !"

So they returned home in
the evening with the bird,
which was bedded down in
a basket near the fire-place.
Kanthai had a warm meal
waiting for them. U-bin had
been pacing up and down the
road. Lighted windows wel-
comed them.

The next day Bapu came
home, with a huge basket
full of surprises. But the
biggest surprise of all was
Grandma who had come
from Sonali. She laughed
and twinkled like a star.

When Kanu told Grand-
ma that Ma did not like
Mulki as much as Sonali,
Grandma asked, "Why ?"

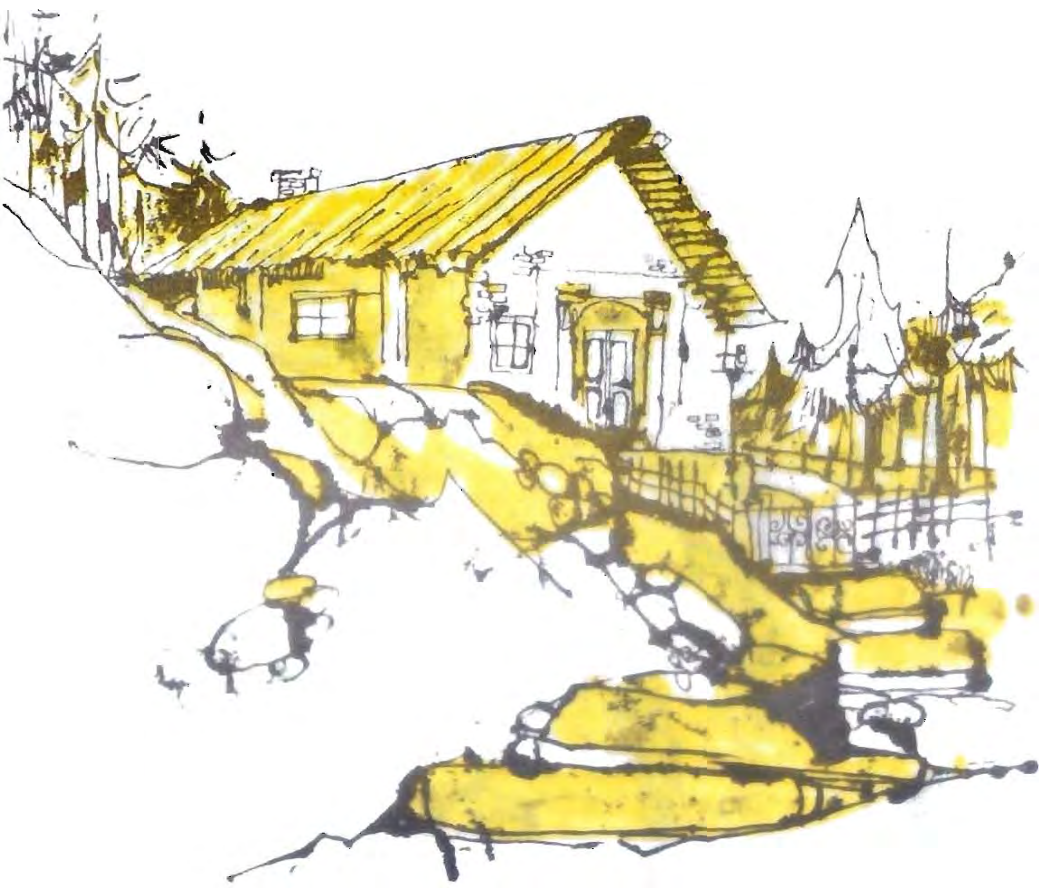
"I get a little homesick,"
said Mother.

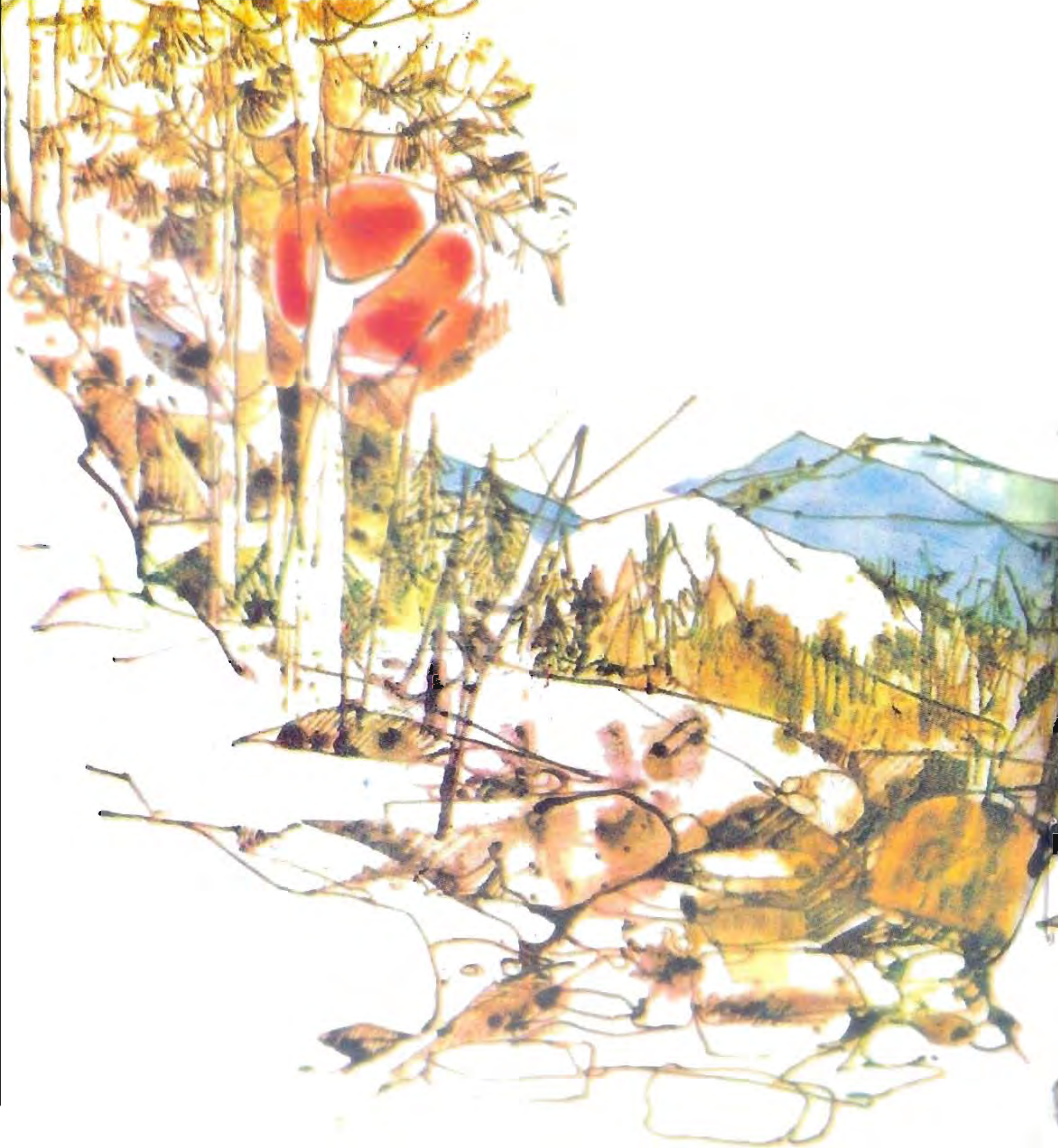
"Homesick ?" said Grand-





ma. "Which home? Home is where you live, child. Your neighbours are your friends. This is your home. It is going to be my home too. Your youngest uncle has retired and will look after the house in Sonali. So I am going to live here for a while, if you will have me. I love this place."





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